

Washington March 17. th 1850

AC. 6467A

My Dear Sir



I promised some time ago to give you an account of the incidents in the life of Mr. F. S. Key which led him to write the "Star Spangled Banner"; and of the circumstances under which it was written. The song has become a national one, and will I think from its great merit continue to be so. Especially in Maryland: and every thing that concerns its author, must be a matter of interest to his children & descendants. And I propose to fulfill my promise with the more pleasure, because while the song shows his genius & taste as a poet, the incidents connected with it & the circumstances under which it was written will show his character & worth as a man. The scene he describes and the warm spirit of patriotism which breathes in the song, are not the offspring of mere fancy, or poetic imagination. He describes what he actually saw. And he tells us what he felt while witnessing the conflict; and what he felt when the battle was over and the victory won by his countrymen. Every word comes warm from his heart, and for that reason, more than from its poetic merit.

more, it never fails to find a response in
the hearts of those who listen to it.

You will remember that in 1814 when the
song was written, I resided in Frederick and
Mr. Key in George Town. - You will recollect also that
soon after the British troops retired from Washing-
ton, a squadron of the enemy's ships made their way
up the Potowmack, and appeared before Alexandria
which was compelled to capitulate: and the
squadron remained there some days, of claim-
ing the Town of Lorton, and whatever else
they wanted. It was rumored and believed in
Frederick that a marauding attack of the same
character would be made on Washington and
George Town, before the ships left the river. Mr. Key's
family were still in George Town. He would not
and indeed could not with honor leave the place
while it was threatened by the enemy: for he was
a volunteer in the light artillery commanded
by Major Peter, which was composed of citizens of
the District of Columbia, who had ununiformed
themselves, & offered their services to the govern-
ment, and who had been employed in active
service, from the time the British fleet appeared
in the Potowmack, preparatory to the movement
upon Washington. And Mr. Key refused to
leave home while Mr. Key was ~~thus~~ ^{thus} daily
exposed

exposed to danger. Believing as we did that an attack would probably be made on George Town we became very anxious about the situation of his family. - For if the attack was made Mr. Key wanted to be with the troops engaged in the defense - and as it was impossible to foresee what would be the issue of the conflict his family by remaining in George Town, might be placed in great & usual peril. When I speak of us, I mean Mr. Key, father and mother & Mrs. Tracy and myself. And it was agreed among us that I should go to George Town, & try to persuade Mr. Key to come away with their children, & stay with me or with Mr. Key's father, until the danger was over. When I reached George Town I found the English ships still at Alexandria, and a body of militia encamped in Washington which had been assembled to defend the city. - But it was believed from the information received, that no attempt would be made by the enemy on Washington or George Town - and preparations were making on our part to annoy them by batteries on shore when they descended the river. The knowledge of these preparations probably hastened their departure: and the second or third day after my arrival the ships were seen moving down the Potomac.

On the evening of the day that the enemy dis-
appeared

disappeared Mr. Bristow had arrived at Mr. Key's and told him that after the British army passed through upper Marlboro, on their return to their ships, and had marched some miles below the Town, a detachment was sent back, which entered back Beans house about midnight: compelled him to rise from his bed; and hurried him off to the British camp, hardly allowing him time to put his clothes on: that he was treated with great roughness and closely guarded: and that as far as his friends were apprised of his situation, they hastened to the head quarters of the English army to solicit his release: but it was peremptorily refused: and they were not even permitted to see him: and that he had been carried as a prisoner on board the fleet. And finding their own efforts unavailing, and alarmed for his safety, his friends in and about Marlboro, ~~it was thought~~ ^{advisable} that Mr. West should hasten to George Town, and request Mr. Key to obtain the sanction of the government to his going on board the admiral's ship under a flag of truce, and endeavoring to procure the discovery of Doctor Bristow before the fleet sailed. It was then lying at the mouth of the Potowmack & its destination, was not at that time known with certainty.

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Doctor Beans as you perhaps you know, was the leading Physician in Upper Marlboro: and an accomplished Scholar and Gentleman. He was highly respected by all who knew him: was the family Physician of Mr. West, and the intimate friend of Mr. Key. He occupied one of the best houses in Upper Marlboro, and lived very handsomely. And his house was selected for the quarters of Admiral Cockburn, and some of the principal Officers of the Army, when the British troops encamped at Marlboro on their march to Washington. These officers were of course furnished with every thing that the house could offer - and they in return treated him with much courtesy and placed guards around his grounds and out-houses to prevent depredations by their troops.

But on the return of the army to the ships, after the main body had passed through the Town, Stragglers who had left the ranks to plunder or from some other motive, made their appearance from time to time, singly or in small squads: and Doctor Beans put himself at the head of a small body of citizens to pursue and make prisoners of them. Information of this proceeding

was

was by some means or other conveyed to the English court, and the decision of which I have often been sent back to release the prisoners and seize Doctor Barnes. They did not seem to regard him and certainly did not treat him as a prisoner ^{of war} but as one who had deserted and broken his faith to them.

Mr. Key readily agreed to undertake the mission in his power, and the President promptly gave his sanction to it. And orders were immediately issued to have the vessel usually employed as a cartel in the communications with the fleet in the Chesapeake, to be made ready without delay: and Mr. John S. Grimes who was agent for the government, for flags of truce & exchange of prisoners, and who was well known & sent to the officers of the fleet, was directed to accompany Mr. Key. - And as soon as the arrangements were made, he hastened to Baltimore where he was to embark: and Mrs. Key & the children went with me to Frederick, & from thence to his father's on Pipe Creek where she remained until he returned.

We heard nothing from him, until the enemy retreated from Fredericksburg - which as well as I can now recollect was a week or ten days

after he left us. And we were becoming anxious
about him, when to our great joy he made his
appearance at my house on his way to join
his family.

He told me that he joined the British fleet
at the mouth of the Potowmack, preparing for
the expedition against Baltimore. He was
courteously received by Admiral Cockburn
& the officers of the army as well as the navy.
But when he made known his business, his applica-
tion was received so coldly that he feared it
would fail. Gen. Scott, and Admiral Cockburn
(who accompanied the expedition to Washington,
particularly the latter - spoke of Capt. Beans
in very harsh terms, and seemed at first not
disposed to release him. It however hap-
pened fortunately that Mr. Skinner carried
letters from the wounded British officers
left at Bladensburg. And in these letters to their
friends on board the fleet, they all spoke of the
humanity & kindness with which they had been
treated, after they had fallen into our hands.
And after a good deal of conversation & strong
representations from Mr. Key as to the character
and standing of Capt. Beans, and of the sup-
eriority which the community in which he lived

took

took in his fate, Genl. Key said that Doct. Brans deserved much more punishment than he had received - but that he felt himself bound to make a return for the kindness which had been shewn to his wounded officers, whom he had been compelled to leave at Bladensburg - and upon that ground said that only he would release him. But Mr. Key was at the same time informed that neither he nor any one else would be permitted to leave the fleet for some days - and must be detained until the attack on Baltimore, which was then about to be made was over. But he was assured that they would make him as comfortable as possible while they detained him. Admiral Cockrane with whom they dined on the day of their arrival, apologized for not accommodating them, on his own ship - saying that it was crowded already with officers of the army: but that they would be well taken care of in the Frigate Surprise commanded by his son Sir Thomas Cockrane. And to this Frigate they were accordingly transferred.

Mr. Key had an interview with Doct. Brans before Genl. Key consented to release him. I do not now recollect whether he was on board of the admiral's ship, or the Surprise - but I believe it

it was the former. He found him in the forward part of the ship among the sailors & soldiers - he had not had a change of clothes from the time he was seized: was constantly treated with indignity by those around him - and no officer would speak to him. He was treated as a unwilling & not a prisoner of war. And this harsh and humiliatiing treatment continued until he was placed on board the Corteal.

Something must have passed when the officers were quartered at his house on the march to Washington, which in the judgment of Genl. Ross bound him not to take arms against the English forces until the troops had reembarked. It is impossible upon any other ground to account for the manner in which he was spoken of and treated. But whatever Genl. Ross & the other officers may have thought I am quite sure that Capt. Beams did not think he was in any degree pledged to abstain from active hostilities against the public enemy. And when he made prisoners of the stragglers, he did not consider himself as a prisoner on parole - nor suppose himself to be violating any obligation that he had incurred. For he was a gentleman of untainted character.

and a nice sense of honor, & incapable of doing
any thing that could have justified such treat-
ment. - Mr. Key imputed the ill usage he received
~~paid~~ to the influence of Admiral Cockburn
who it is still remembered, while he commanded
in the Chesapeake, carried on hostilities in
a vindictive temper - appealing & pun-
dering defencless villages - or countenancing
such proceedings by those under his com-
mand.

Mr. Key & Mr. Skinner continued on board the
"Surprise," where they were very kindly treated
by Sir Thomas Cochrane, until the fleet reached
the Patapsco, & preparations were making for
landing the troops. Admiral Cochrane then
shifted his flag to the Frigate, in order that
he might be able to move further up the
river, & superintend in person the attack
by water on the Fort. And Mr. Key & Mr. Skinner
were then sent on board their own vessel, with
a guard of sailors or marines to prevent them
from landing. They were permitted to take
Doct. Beale with them, and they thought them-
selves fortunate in being anchored in a po-
sition which enabled them to see distinctly the
flag of Fort M^c. Henry from the deck of the vessel.

He proceeded then with much animation to describe the scene on the night of the bombardment. He and Mr. Thorne remained on deck during the night watching every shell from the moment it was fired, until it fell - and when it fell his -
towing with breathless interest to hear if an explosion followed. While the bombardment continued, it was sufficient proof that the Fort had not surrendered. But it suddenly ceased some time before day, and as they had no communication with any of the enemy's ships, they did not know whether the Fort had surrendered, or the attack upon it ^{had been} abandoned. They faced the deck for the residue of the night in painful suspense watching with intense anxiety for the return of day, & looking every few minutes at their watches to see how long they must wait for it: and as soon as it dawned and before it was light enough to see objects at a distance their glances were turned to the Fort uncertain whether they should see there the stars & stripes on the flag of the enemy. At length the light came, and they saw that "one flag was still there". And as the day advanced they ^{discovered} from the movements

movements of the boats, between the shore, and the fleet, that the troops had been safely landed, and that many wounded men were carried to the ships. At length he was informed that the attack on Baltimore ^{had failed} was abandoned, and the British army re-embarking: and that he and Mr. Skinner and Dr. ^{Brown} would be permitted to leave them & go where they pleased, as soon as the troops were on board & the fleet ready to sail.

He then told me that under the excitement of the time he had written a song, and handed me a printed copy of 'The Star Spangled Banner'. - When I had read it and expressed my admiration, I asked him how he had found time in the scenes he had been passing through to compose such a song? He said he commenced it on the deck of their ship in the terror of the moment when he saw the enemy hastily retreating to their ships, & looked at the flag, he had watched for ^{so} anxiously as the morning opened: that he had written some lines - or brief notes that ^{aid} wrote him in reciting them to his mind, upon the back of a letter which he happened to have in his pocket: and for some of the lines as he proceeded he was obliged to rely altogether on his memory: and then he finished it in the boat on his way to the shore: and wrote it out

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it now stands, at the Hotel on the night he reached Baltimore, & immediately after he arrived. He said that on the next morning he took it to Judge Nicholson to ask him what he thought of it: and that he was so much pleased with it that he immediately sent it to a printer, and directed copies to be struck off in broadsheet form. and that Mr. Key believed it had been favorably received by the Baltimore public. -

Judge Nicholson & Mr. Key you know were very connected by marriage - Mrs. Nicholson & Mrs. Key being sisters. The Judge was a man of cultivated taste - had at one time been distinguished among the leading men in Congress, and was at the period of which I am speaking, the Chief Justice for the Baltimore Circuit, and one of the judges of the court of appeals of Maryland. Notwithstanding his judicial character which exempted him from military service, he accepted the ^{command} of a volunteer company of Artillery. And when the enemy approached & an attack on the Fort was expected he and his company offered their services to the government to assist in its defense. They were accepted and formed a part of the garrison during the bombardment. - The Judge had been relieved from

from duty and returned to his family only the
night before Mr. Key showed him his song - And
you may easily imagine, the feelings, ^{with} which
at such a moment he read it, and gave it to
the publick. It was no doubt as Mr. Key modestly
expressed it favorably received. It left them
as soon after it was placed in the hands of
the printer, it was all over Town - and visited
with enthusiasm - and took its place at once
a national song.

I have made this account of "the Star Spangled
Banner" longer than I intended, and find that
I have introduced incidents & persons, outside
of the subject I originally ~~intended~~ ^{containing} -
related. But I have felt a melancholy pleasure
in recalling events connected in any degree with
the life of one, with whom I was so long and so
closely united in friendship & affection: and
whom I so much admired for his brilliant genius
& loved for his many virtues. I am sure however
that neither you nor any of his children or
descendants will think the account I have
given too long.

With regards to Dr. J. J.
Your friend truly

Charles Howard Esq.
Baltimore

R. B. Tandy